



JOHN ENGLER
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN
FAMILY INDEPENDENCE AGENCY
LANSING



DOUGLAS E. HOWARD
DIRECTOR

August 30, 2002

Mr. Ron Dzwonkowski
Editorial Page Editor
Detroit Free Press
600 W. Fort Street
Detroit, Michigan 48226

Dear Mr. Dzwonkowski:

I am writing concerning the August 30 article "State loses track of 302 abused or neglected kids". It appears that the Detroit Free Press, in a rush to get a sensational headline, has sacrificed an opportunity to do a fair and balanced story about this issue.

This article made it look as if the Family Independence Agency doesn't care about these children. Nothing could be further from the truth. The state did not lose these kids. Many of the "missing" kids have walked away from their placement or been taken away without court permission. Some teenagers and parents make decisions that are contrary to agency plans and court orders designed to address the issues that brought this family to our attention. The FIA takes steps to ensure that the families abide by these plans, but it does not always happen.

The 302 children referenced in this article are "Absent without Legal Permission", meaning they are no longer in the required court-ordered placement, and are a subset of approximately 20,000 abused and neglected children who are under court jurisdiction. Nine out of ten are over the age of 14. Many are runaways, teens who don't tolerate structure, who want to leave and do so, and have a history of running away from their parents and foster homes. The others are younger, or members of sibling groups who have been abducted by a parent or relative, or whose family simply moved to avoid further involvement with FIA or the court.

When a child is identified as "Absent without Legal Permission", the FIA has a clearly defined process that is followed. If the child lives with a foster parent, the foster parent notifies FIA or the private agency within an hour of the child's absence. If the child still lives with a parent, relatives often make the report. In either case, the court is notified and we work closely with law enforcement and provide all pertinent data that might help them find the child.

The FIA seriously accepts its responsibility to protect the safety of children who come into foster care. While the goal is to reduce the 302 to zero, the reality is some adults and children will voluntarily choose to disregard the court and the agency's plan to assist the family to overcome the barriers that brought them to the agency in the first place. Fortunately, Michigan has a process in place to quickly identify when it has happened.

Sincerely,

Douglas E. Howard, Director
Family Independence Agency